

BHARAT MATA

THE VOICE OF EVERY INDIAN

"If words come from the heart they will enter the heart".

- Rumi

Last year I spent a hundred and forty-five days walking across the land I call home. I started at the edge of the sea and walked through heat, dust and rain. Through forests, towns and hills, until I reached the soft snow of my beloved Kashmir.

Many people along the way asked me: why are you doing this? Even today they ask, why? What were you looking for? What did you find?

I wanted to understand the thing I loved. The thing for which I was ready to give up everything including my life. The thing that could make me take so much pain and abuse, for so many years.

I wanted to know precisely what it was that I loved. Was it this land? The mountains? The sea? Was it a person? Was it a people, or a set of ideas? But there was something else, I also wanted to understand what sort of a heart was mine that had allowed itself to be captured in this way?

For years I used to run eight to ten kilometres every evening. So I thought, "twenty five?" I can easily walk twenty five kilometres. I was certain the walk was going to be easy.

Within a few days, the pain arrived. My old knee injury, one that hours of physiotherapy had banished, was back. The next morning I found myself in tears, sitting alone in a metal container. How was I ever going to walk the 3800 kilometres that lay ahead? The crutch of arrogance was gone.

We would start walking in the darkness before dawn. Almost immediately the pain would begin. Like a hungry wolf it would follow me everywhere I went, waiting for me to stop. A few days into the walk, my physio joined us, he came and gave me sage advice. The pain remained.

And then I started to notice something. Every time I would think about stopping, every time I considered giving up, someone would come and gift me the energy to continue. Once it was a lovely little girl with a beautiful letter, another time an old lady with some banana chips, then a man who suddenly ran up and hugged me. It was as if a silent energy kept helping me, and like fireflies in a dark forest, it was everywhere. When I really needed it, it was there to help and to guide.

The Yatra progressed. At first I wanted to tell everyone what I thought. I wanted to show them I understood. I spoke about solutions to their problems. But soon the numbers of people became so large, the pain so persistent that I started to observe and listen.

There was always a din in the space where we walked, with loud slogans, clicking cameras, and people pushing and shoving. Again and again and again. Every day, for eight to ten hours I would just listen and try and ignore my knee.

Then one day, I felt a silence I had never felt before. I could hear nothing but the voice of the person holding my hand and talking to me. The inner voice that had spoken to me ever since I was a little child was gone. It felt as if something had died.

He was a farmer and he spoke about his crop. He was crying as he showed me the strands of rotten cotton, I saw the years of suffering in his hands. In those puffs of cotton, I could see the fear he felt for his children. On his sunken face I could see the nights he had spent, hungry. He spoke about how he had helplessly watched his father die. He told me about the humiliation he felt when he had no money left to give to his wife. There was nothing I could say, so I stopped walking and hugged him.

This happened again and again. It happened with children, with mothers, with students. It happened with shop keepers, carpenters and labourers. It happened with soldiers. Now I would almost never hear myself or the crowd. My attention would not move from the person who

spoke into my ear. The constant chatter and judgement inside me was gone. When a student would say they were scared of failing - I would listen. When a group of little children who were forced onto the street to beg for a living shivered in front of me one morning, I decided I would walk in my t-shirt till I no longer could.

The object of my love had suddenly revealed herself. My beloved Bharat Mata was not a land. It wasn't a set of ideas. It wasn't a particular culture, history or religion. Neither was it the caste that people had been assigned. India was the voice of every single Indian, no matter how weak or strong. India was the happiness, the fear and the pain hidden deep inside all the voices.

To hear India, my own voice - my desires - my ambitions had to fall silent. India would speak to one of her own, but only if one was humble and completely silent.

How simple it had turned out to be. I had been looking in the river for that which could only be found in the sea.

